

Persecuted in Revolutionary Baltimore: The Sufferings of Quakers

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QUAKER LADY DETAINING THE ENGLISH GENERAL.

“Quaker Lady detaining the English General.” This engraving refers to Mary Lindley Murray who, as legend has it, delayed Sir Henry Clinton and his officers by treating them to food and drink, tempting them with her charms, while the Americans under the command of Israel Putnam escaped after the disastrous Battle of Kip’s Bay in September 1776. This cartoon counters the feelings of some revolutionaries by making Quakers seem favorable to the revolutionary cause.

In March 1777, revolutionary leader John Adams wrote an angry letter to his wife, Abigail. He declared that Baltimore was a “dull place” where many of the town’s remaining inhabitants

were Quakers, who he described as “dull as Beetles” and a “kind of neutral Tribe, or the Race of the insipids.” [1] This article continues the series about Baltimore Town by focusing on the Baltimorean Quakers, also called the Society of Friends. These Quakers were living in a town where religious beliefs interlinked with political events. You can read our other posts about Baltimore during the Revolutionary War period [here](#).

Adams clearly misrepresented the role of Quakers in Baltimore Town. [2] The Quakers were controversial in the public arena because of their dedication to pacifism resulting in refusal to pay war [taxes](#), assert loyalty to the colonies, or lend supplies to the Continental Army.

Even though some Maryland Quakers raised money to feed the people of Boston in 1775, revolutionaries still saw them as supporting the Crown, rather than taking a neutral position. [3] Revolutionary pamphleteer [Thomas Paine](#), the son of a Quaker, even declared that “were the Quakers...influenced by the quiet principles they profess to hold, they would...be the first of all men to approve of independence” because it gives the opportunity of “carrying their favourite principle of peace into general practice, by establishing governments that shall hereafter exist without wars.” [4] Others thought that the Quakers engaged in espionage for the British, were treasonous to the revolutionary cause or partook in illegalities. [5]

The negative perception of Quakers by revolutionaries led to fines, looting of their property, imprisonment, and [numerous other forms of discrimination](#). [6] However, they didn’t stay silent. One letter to the *Maryland Journal*, in 1777, by a presumed Quaker named ‘Pacifius’ defended neutrals, like Quakers, saying “let us remember our duty, as Christians, to love our enemies” and that the Maryland legislature should repeal “acts, which create disqualifications, or impose a tax on...neutrals.” [7]

The Maryland Committee of Sufferings recorded acts of Quaker persecution in the turbulent revolutionary environment. This committee, similar to Meetings for Sufferings created in the Northern colonies in the early 1770s, petitioned the state government of Maryland about discrimination against them, pushed for exemptions to military service, and generally advocated on behalf of Quakers. [8]

In October 1778, the Committee of Sufferings in Kent County, the first of its kind in Maryland, told fellow brethren that Quakers experienced long terms of imprisonment and banishment. [9] They endured the consequences of not wanting to comply with “human injunctions and institutions.” [10] Their reasoning was laid out in detail in an appeal to the Maryland General Assembly in October 1778 by this committee. In the letter they declared that they were resolute in their principles and opposed their Revolutionary War:

“...we behold...the devastation occasioned by the present war...we believe it to be our indispensable duty to abstain from all wars & combat which have the tendency to destroy the lives of men....we cannot, consistent with our religious principles, join with either of the contending parties....constrained from entering into solemn engagements of allegiance with either....in consequence thereof, we have been brought under great sufferings...[the state] government will not derive any advantage from...continuing our sufferings...we charitably hope the Legislature of Maryland would...avoid...the imputation of persecution...we...desire to live peace with all men, and should of any of our members

now deviate from our...principles by joining in war, entering into plots...against the government...the guilt of such will most assuredly be on themselves” [11]

The war caused divisions in the Quakers community. Some Quakers wanted to give their [oaths of allegiance](#) or otherwise join the revolutionary cause. [12] This concerned those on the committee because this action went against established principles since it constituted participating directly in the war’s bloodshed. Other “concerned Quakers” made munitions for the Continental Army, worked for the Army, or gave starving soldiers food and supplies. [13] Later in the war, in Philadelphia, some joined [the “Free Quakers,”](#) and took up weapons against the British.

Still, the majority of Quakers adhered to their pacifist principles and disowned such dissident forces, charging them with disobedience. If someone was disowned they would be forcibly renounced or no longer accepted in the Quaker community, which could result in exile.

The story of a Cecil County man, named Jeremiah Brown, shows discrimination that Quakers faced and how the Quaker community stuck together. On March 24, 1778 he admitted his wrong at the Brick Meeting House in [Calvert](#), Cecil County:

“...when my wagon and team came back, which were forcibly taken to carry military stores, [I] did receive wages for the same and was paid for one of the horses which were lost in the journey, which compliance has not been easy to mind, being convinced that the testimony of truth is against such, I do not hereby acknowledge my weakness therein, hoping and desiring for the future to give closer attention to the inward principles which preserve the error.” [14]

This was against Quaker rules because it constituted complicity in the war. While the meeting was unhappy that a member of Brown’s family went to check to see on the care of their impounded horses, Brown could have felt “weak” since he been a loyal Quaker for many years. [15] Interestingly, there is no record that Brown was exiled from the Quakers since he was an active member for years to come. [16]

Actions similar to Brown’s admission either didn’t happen or were downplayed in the Baltimore meeting. This was proven to be the case when in 1781, the Baltimore Yearly Meeting declared to fellow members that “most Friends appear to be careful in maintaining our testimony against war by refusing payment of taxes.” [17]

The Baltimore meeting of Quakers was politicized by slavery. Throughout 1776, they discussed slavery in their quarterly meetings. [18]. By 1777, Maryland Quakers, under the jurisdiction of the Baltimore meeting, were threatened to be disowned if they manumit their enslaved blacks. [19] From February 1776 to November 1777, a report was prepared by Henry Wilson, Benjamin Howard, and other brethren, on those Quakers who kept slaves. The meeting recorded the manumissions of sixty-two enslaved blacks owned by fellow members and continued to assist their fellow brethren in other matters. [20] However, manumissions were not an end to slavery. The use of manumissions in Baltimore Town, for example, sustained and expanded slavery for years to come. [21] Compounding

this reality was the vital role the town played in the regional slave trade, which it had largely siphoned off from Philadelphia. [22]

In November 1777, the report, strongly condemning the practice of slavery, was released to the Baltimore quarterly meeting. The committee reported that

“...they have carefully visited nearly all the families of friends that are involv’d in the oppressive practice of Slave-keeping & have with sorrow to observe the backwardness that prevails with too many Elders in society, to do Justice to that oppressed people...Testimony should be maintain’d against this oppressive practice.” [23]

While Quakers were seen by revolutionaries as siding with the British Crown, they took sides when it came to the moral issue of slavery.

In the turbulent revolutionary environment, Quakers in Baltimore Town survived through a war which would change the new United States as the British imperial system was removed and the colonial elite structures remained.

– *Burkely Hermann, Maryland Society of the Sons of American Revolution Research Fellow, 2016.*

Notes

[1] [Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 7 March 1777](#) [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.

[2] It is possible that Adams was factious in this letter.

[3] Indian Spring Monthly Meeting: Minutes (Sandy Spring), 1772-1817, 27 October 1775 [MSA SC 2978 SCM 638-1]. The Indian Spring [meeting specifically](#), as some have noted, “even indirectly contributed to the war effort by raising money in 1775 for the inhabitants of faraway Boston after the start of the Revolution.”

[4] Thomas Paine, “[The American Crisis Number III](#),” *Maryland Journal*, May 6, 1777, Baltimore, Vol. IV, issue 182, page 2.

[5] *Maryland Journal*, May 13, 1777, Baltimore, Vol. IV, issue 184, page 1; *Maryland Journal*, September 16, 1777, Baltimore, Vol. IV, issue 202, page 1-2.

[6] J. Saurin Norris, [The early Friends \(or Quakers\) in Maryland](#) (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1862), 25; Camila Townsend, *Tales of Two Cities: Race and Economic Culture in Early Republican North and South America: Guayaquil, Ecuador, and Baltimore, Maryland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 105. In Maryland, the General Assembly, [even in 1747](#), passed a law to condemn public drunkenness outside Quakers houses of worship among other laws in [1718](#), [1748](#), [1752](#), [1757](#), and [1765](#). Even so, they continued to meet in a Baltimorean private dwelling, a meeting place since about 1700. Starting in the 1770s, Quaker millers, who lived in Philadelphia, were displaced by the Revolution and settled near Baltimore. It is worth noting that a general meeting of the Quakers for the state of Maryland was not held in Baltimore until 1787.

[7] Pacificus, "To the Public," *Maryland Journal*, June 16, 1778, Baltimore, Vol. V, issue 242, page 1. This is not the same as Alexander Hamilton, a man who took the pseudonym 'Pacificus' and debated with framers of the Constitution.

[8] Arthur Mekeel, "The American Revolution: New York Divided," *Quaker Crosscurrents: Three Hundred Years of Friends in the New York Yearly Meetings* (ed. Hugh Barbour, Christopher Densmore, Elizabeth H. Moger, Nancy C. Sorel, Alson D. Van Wagner, and Arthur J. Worrall, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 51-61; David Cooper, "For the Testimony of Truth," *American Quaker War Tax Resistance* (ed. David M. Gross, second edition, ebook: CreateSpace, 2011), 216-217; "Conclusion of the Piece Begun in the Maryland Journal Extraordinary of the 6th of November," *Maryland Journal*, December 3, 1782, Vol. IX, issue 483, page 1. Based on the types of persecution that Quakers endured in later years it is possible to infer the conditions that they lived through in that fateful year of independence. Even with their outspoken beliefs, the Quakers were still worshipping in a meeting house in Baltimore by the end of the war, along with the town's other religious denominations.

[9] Baltimore Yearly Meetings, Meeting for sufferings 1778-1841, October 1778, p. 2-3 [[MSA SC 2400](#), SCM 556-2].

[10] Baltimore Quarterly Meeting: Minutes, 1710-1822, 1776, Quarterly Meeting for the Western Shore Collection, Special Collections, p. 132 [[MSA SC 3123](#), SCM 571-1].

[11] Baltimore Yearly Meetings, October 1778, Meeting for sufferings 1778-1841, p. 4-5 [[MSA SC 2400](#), SCM 556-2].

[12] Baltimore Yearly Meetings, October 1778, Meeting for sufferings 1778-1841, p. 4-5 [[MSA SC 2400](#), SCM 556-2].

[13] Peter Brock, *Pacifism in the United States: From the Colonial Era to the First World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 223, 228; *Maryland Journal*, November 4, 1777, Vol. v, issue 209, page 4; *Maryland Journal*, April 21, 1778, Vol. V, issue 233, page 1.

[14] Brock, 39, 223; *Bi-centennial of Brick Meeting-House, Calvert, Cecil County, Maryland* (Lancaster: Wickersham Printing Company, 1902), 55. This text also notes that Brown was born in [Little Britain, Pennsylvania](#), which had its own meeting of Quakers was associated with the East Nottingham meeting in Maryland, which was in Cecil County's East Nottingham Hundred.

[15] Brock, 223; Grace L. Tracey and John Philip Dern, *Pioneers of Old Monocacy: The Early Settlement of Frederick County, Maryland 1721-1743* (Baltimore: Genealogical Printing, 1989), 82; *Bi-centennial of Brick Meeting-House*, 46, 53, 56. It is possible that some of these Jeremiah Browns could have been his father.

[16] *Bi-centennial of Brick Meeting-House*, 66, 70.

[17] Brock, 212; "The Examination of Joseph Galloway, Esq; before the House of Commons," *Maryland Journal*, November 23, 1779, Baltimore, Vol. VI, issue 322, page 1; "A Further Extract from the Examination of Joseph Galloway, Esq; by a Committee of the British House of

Commons,” *Maryland Journal*, December 7, 1779, Baltimore, Vol. VI, issue 324, page 1. It is likely that Quakers lived under similar conditions in 1776, especially after [the Declaration of Independence](#). During the British occupation of Philadelphia after 1778, the British reported that one-fourth of the population were Quakers and that they refused to carry arms.

[18] Baltimore Quarterly Meeting: Minutes, 1710-1822, 1776-1777, Quarterly Meeting for the Western Shore Collection, Special Collections, p. 131, 133-134 [[MSA SC 3123](#), SCM 571-1]. They also discussed slavery in their yearly meetings, of course.

[19] Herbert Aptheker, “The Quakers and Negro Slavery.” *The Journal of Negro History* 25, no. 3 (1940): 352; Jennifer H. Doresey, *Hirelings: African American Workers and Free Labor in Early Maryland* (London: Cornell University Press, 2011), 40; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 25; David W Jordan, “”Gods Candle” within Government: Quakers and Politics in Early Maryland.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1982): 653. In earlier years, Quakers in Baltimore had “participated integrally in the local and provisional life of the colony,” even engaging in acts of civil disobedience.

[20] Baltimore Quarterly Meeting: Minutes, 1710-1822, 1777, Quarterly Meeting for the Western Shore Collection, Special Collections, p. 135-137 [[MSA SC 3123](#), SCM 571-1]; Baltimore Yearly Meetings, Miscellaneous Contents, 1677–1901, Advice (General), p. 6-7 [[MSA SC 2400](#), SCM 551-1].

[21] Stephen Whitman, “Diverse Good Causes: Manumission and the Transformation of Urban Slavery.” *Social Science History* 19, no. 3 (1995): 334.

[22] Jean R. Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 57.

[23] Baltimore Quarterly Meeting: Minutes, 1710-1822, 1777, Quarterly Meeting for the Western Shore Collection, Special Collections, p. 137 [[MSA SC 3123](#), SCM 571-1]. In that meeting, the investigation of fellow brethren who held enslaved blacks was continued, with a report scheduled for the next quarterly meeting.

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